

Alcohol Use and Pregnancy



Maternal prenatal alcohol use is one of the leading preventable causes of birth defects and developmental disabilities.

- Children exposed to alcohol during fetal development can suffer a wide array of disorders, from subtle changes in I.Q. to profound mental retardation. They can also suffer growth retardation in varying degrees and be born with birth defects of major organ systems. One of the most severe effects of drinking during pregnancy is fetal alcohol syndrome (FAS).
- Approximately one in 30 pregnant women in the United States reports “risk drinking” (seven or more drinks per week, or five or more drinks on any one occasion). Drinking alcohol at these levels poses a serious health threat to the unborn fetus.
- More than half of all women of childbearing age in the United States report that they drink alcohol. Also, more than half of all pregnancies are unplanned. Birth defects associated with prenatal exposure to alcohol can occur in the first 3 to 8 weeks of pregnancy, before a woman even knows that she is pregnant. Although early pregnancy is a particularly vulnerable time, damage to the fetus’ developing organ systems can occur throughout pregnancy as a result of continued alcohol exposure.
- Fortunately, **FAS and other prenatal alcohol-related disorders are 100% preventable** - if a woman does not drink alcohol while she is pregnant. Women should avoid drinking if they are pregnant, planning to become pregnant, or at risk of becoming pregnant (i.e., sexually active and not using an effective form of birth control).



CDC is working to prevent alcohol exposure during pregnancy by educating women of childbearing age about the dangers of alcohol use during pregnancy and by intervening with women at risk for an alcohol-exposed pregnancy.

- CDC and three universities are conducting Project CHOICES, a multi-site clinical trial that identifies and intervenes with women at high risk for an alcohol-exposed pregnancy before they become pregnant. A modified version of Project CHOICES is also being conducted for female college students under the age of 25.
- Three universities are developing targeted media campaigns to warn women of childbearing age about the dangers of alcohol use during pregnancy.
- Two universities are developing epidemiologic and intervention studies for reducing alcohol-exposed pregnancies among Hispanic women.
- Two universities are investigating the role of biomarkers for prenatal alcohol exposure to identify women at risk for having a baby with prenatal alcohol effects and to identify newborns at risk for adverse effects from prenatal alcohol exposure.
- CDC conducts ongoing monitoring of alcohol exposure among women of childbearing age using the Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance System (BRFSS).

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